

# Interview

## Interview of M.L. Tickoo

by Pushpinder Syal

It is a warm October afternoon. At Prof M.L. Tickoo's (MLT) home in Chandigarh, Mrs. Champa Tickoo makes the afternoon tea for us while we settle down to talk about a subject on which Prof Tickoo has written, taught and deliberated for many years – the teaching of English in India. We have reproduced extracts from the interview.

Pushpinder Syal (PS): Professor Tickoo, we are particularly concerned today about the word 'multilingualism'. What does it mean to have multilingualism in our classrooms?

MLT: If you're placed in a situation where there are many languages, you can simply use the languages you have around you – three languages or four – you do not have to specially *create* a multilingual classroom. It's there, to be made use of in the best possible way.

PS: Do you think there is an apprehension that children will lose interest in their mother tongue, or lose competence in their mother tongue once they start learning a second language?

MLT: Such fears do exist but are absolutely unnecessary. Nobody has ever proved that the mother tongue is a roadblock in learning another language. There is truth in the fact that sounds need to be attended to and that some sounds of the mother tongue may intrude on the second language. But what cannot and should not be forgotten is that the mother tongue is a great support, a major and as yet untapped resource in learning the second language, and that a transfer of skills takes place during this learning. This was revealed from the earliest work done in India by Michael West in 1926.

When he did his longitudinal classroom experiments in West Bengal, he concluded that reading is a general power – there are general strategies – whether in the first or second / foreign language. The main thing is to build upon what has already been done in the *first* language – what Fishman called the 'strong' language – and transfer from that 'strong' language to the 'weak' language becomes possible, particularly if the learner has reached the stage that Cummins calls the CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency).<sup>1</sup> And that is what the teacher is supposed to achieve in the classroom. But what we were taught in the 50s was that 'mother tongue, the devil, is waiting' and we must nip the evil in the bud. Errors that enter never come out and in fact fossilize; so we must make sure that errors never occur. This was partly behaviourism at work; the idea came from B.F. Skinner who found the need to make sure that 95 per cent of the children 'learn' 95 per cent of the things. Associated with this was the myth that the performing teacher can best teach any learner, not necessarily the participating, performing learner; in fact the more aggressive the teacher, the greater the belief that the language was being learnt. But the truth was that the *more* aggressive the teacher, the *less* the learner could participate in learning, and very often hardly anything was learnt, although the teacher was happy that she had done her job. Of course, there is a small part of the sound system that needs to be carefully attended to, and there are ways of doing that.

PS: It also depends on *what* the second language it is. If it is English, with all its associations, power and social status...?

MLT: Yes, but in fact, it is the other way round when it comes to English. The English language *can threaten* the existence of the mother tongue, especially where the mother tongue is a minority or a tribal language of India. This is because of the belief sold to us that English should grow independently if it is to grow well. Parents who want the economic welfare of their children fight all the way through to see this done. Moreover, teachers sometimes punish the child for speaking in Hindi or Punjabi or Kashmiri. But it is not only the parents but also the bilingual experts who have said this. For example, in 1984, W.F. Mackey, who had done a lot of work on bilingualism, said that there were unproductive and productive languages and parents should decide whether or not to allow their child to give time to a language that was unproductive, at the cost of a productive language. So if we build a belief system that languages are to be seen as enemies, then there is a problem.

In some cases, the battle for superiority between languages has absurd manifestations. I remember seeing a book for Vietnamese children, written by an American linguist. This book, entitled 'English Names' had a hundred 'English' names, and the children each had to take up an English name, because otherwise it would spoil the 'pure' atmosphere of the classroom. My daughter told me that in China, where she's teaching now, the children had taken up names like 'table', 'chair', even 'yes' and 'no' – anything, as long as they were 'English' words. One of the children said 'My name is Miaow'. The poor things had to hide their identities and their names because the teacher said there are English names and non-English names.

PS: There is a belief that the second language should be introduced at an early age, as children between the ages 5 to 14 will be better able to learn a new language. Is there any evidence to support this?

MLT: Yes, there is this question of an early start. From the 50s to the 80s, it was believed, the earlier the better. The MELT (Madras English Language Teaching) Campaign, for example, which was the outcome of the Madras (now Tamil Nadu) Government's introduction of English in primary schools, necessitated the training of 70,000 primary teachers. The campaign appeared to have taken the belief seriously because of the influence of a team of neurosurgeons led by Wilbur Penfield in Canada (he was invited to give talks on All India Radio), who said that the brain undergoes changes around the age of twelve and becomes stiffened, so learning another language becomes physiologically difficult. Of course, people challenged this, notably Michael West, who argued on the basis of data from a research that a late starter learns faster, uses cognitive abilities and various strategies. Moreover, the earlier you start in school, the less proficient are the teachers who teach English. In the non-native context, the primary teachers had (and even today have) hardly any knowledge of English, so the base, the foundation, was ruined; therefore the later you start, the better it is. Apart from the theoretical argument, there is also a political argument as stated in the 'Jan Adesh': *The nation is committed to give English for use to every child in school and we teachers must work to make it happen effectively. An early start, unless schools have primary teachers who have adequate English, may not prove to be a sound alternative.*

The recommendations of the NCF 2005 (National Curriculum Framework) for

languages state clearly that English should be part of a bilingual or multilingual classroom. The mother tongue is already in place when a child comes to school, therefore teaching of English can be started straightaway. We cannot really say that we should start late, but if teaching of English is started at age 6 or 7, it should be all right.

PS: Could you suggest how languages of children can be used in teaching a second language such as English, Hindi or Telugu? Would bilingual materials be helpful?

MLT: There has been a lot of work in which two languages have been brought together. One of the earliest instances in India was in the 1920s, when Wyatt (1923) demonstrated, how we could put the *grammar* of two languages together to good use. Wherever he saw that there was a clear comparison, he used that as a basis for teaching. He used, for example, *number and gender* in Urdu and English nouns as a basis for teaching. However, where there were differences, he took a contrastive stance and showed the contrast at work. Where there wasn't either, he kept the mother tongue out and pointed out the absence or the addition of an element from another language. Another successful ELT practitioner – W.M. Ryburn – worked close by in Kharar, Punjab, on the same belief system. He went a little further and made the teachers of the mother tongue and English draw a list of essays at the beginning of the year. These essays were to be written in both languages by the children. They found that while in the mother tongue the children wrote more elaborately, in English, the essays were shorter. With the help of what they had written in the mother tongue, the children could make improvements in their English essays. Thus it has been proven that transfer is possible, and two languages can indeed help each other. This principle of *additive* bilingualism rather than

the subtractive was understood as far back as the 1920s to the 1940s. In any case, if the teaching of mother tongue is strengthened, the base of language becomes sound, and that helps. Even earlier in 1917-19, the Calcutta University Commission comprising academics, had recommended that mother tongue teachers be trained, and that ways be found to improve the theory and practice of its teaching; also, the mother tongue and English should be made to work in harmony. But we do not know what happened during and after the 50s and how all this was forgotten.

PS: Do you think this was because of the three language formula, or other language policies?

MLT: Yes, perhaps. But it is possible that we were *sold* certain policies, and history made us helpless. In 1943, Winston Churchill said the time had come when they didn't need to conquer countries; they could do all that and more by conquering people's minds. The English language was perhaps their most potent weapon and so that was attempted. With India becoming free and the Constitution making education available for many more children, there were very few competent teachers of English. There was great need for a panacea. The British Council stepped in and promoted a monolingual approach, e.g. Mahabaleshwar 1950 and Nagpur 1957. This monolingual approach, termed Structural Approach by the Indians, had very little proven theory. As regards the textbooks, it seemed The British Council was not happy with Indians writing their own books. When there was an initiative to do so at the CIE (later CIEFL) under Prof Gokak, and the thinking was that we should start writing books even if we didn't produce the best, we could still have good books; our otherwise very friendly and greatly cooperative colleagues from the U.K didn't join us, they stayed out. What Phillipson described in his

book (1992), gives us a possible clue as to what could have happened. There were meetings in London, at the ministerial level, and they clearly said that foreigners should not be encouraged to write English textbooks and take their bread away from them. They told us that only *they* could do it, since they wanted to sell us the English language. Prof. Randolph Quirk, like Prof Bruce Pattison earlier, stood for the spreading of the English language as 'both our duty and our capital'. The scenario repeated itself with NELTS (National English Language Testing System) at CIEFL much later – some of us were made to believe that we didn't know what proficiency in language was; we could do achievement tests but not proficiency tests, and only the 'knowers' ought to attempt those.

PS: How are the ways of using the languages of children in learning a second language different from the traditional grammar translation method that had been in vogue till the 70s?

MLT: It's not true that the 'traditional grammar translation' method was there only till the 70s – it carried on even after that. But what teachers need to do is to be sure exactly where and in what way the mother tongue should be used as a support language; interlingual translation should be used wherever the teacher feels the need and sees value in its use. We need to evolve our own a methodology, that is appropriate to our multilingual classrooms. There was a suggestion in Dodson's Bilingual Method which had incorporated the best of *direct method* with support from the mother tongue wherever needed. It was quite successful, though the British Council played it down as it may have been viewed as a threat to the monolingual approach they were advocating. Due to their adherence to the direct method, teachers began to take pride in never using a word of the mother tongue. It

must be understood that the direct method is not a sacred cow. But using the mother tongue means that the *learners* themselves should be doing the work, using the languages themselves. There has been some experimentation in this field, and we need to put in an effort to collect the good work that has been done; and perhaps through some agency, put together the dissertations that have been written over the years. Then there is the larger project, of putting it into practice, and evolving our own methodology.

PS: Should the teacher be familiar with the language or languages of children?

MLT: Harold E. Palmer, the founder of modern ELT methodology in Japan (1922-1936), said that in order to teach English in an EFL context, the teacher need not be a native speaker. Nor does being a native speaker or even teaching the language in the UK qualify him as a good EFL teacher. One needs the experience of the non-native context. That's what he did – he learnt Japanese before going to Japan. West, an ELT pioneer in India, learnt Bengali before joining the Indian Education Service. Both believed that the teacher must learn the language of the learner. This increases the learner's confidence, and makes the learning atmosphere friendlier. If India needs English teachers, it needs those teachers who are proficient in the learners' language(s). Most English teachers are proud of *not* 'knowing the learners' language; they feel that if they speak in that language, they're 'coming down' in their profession as teachers of English. A major attitudinal change is needed to improve our profession's responsiveness to the nation's needs.

PS: While there are clearly defined needs for English, people don't perceive the need for the mother tongue in the same way. And if it is not



needed for specific purposes, wouldn't there be less motivation to learn it?

MLT: We have to accept that English has become an indispensable weapon. But it does not mean we should give up what we have. Children have to be conscious of the mother tongue as their identity; not only to translate, but also as Gurudev Tagore told the teachers long ago, *re-translate*, start learning what needs to be done in the language they're learning. Henry Sweet said by simply saying you should use it, you're not doing anything. You have to use the language. The mother tongue is there, in the mind, why not use it where it is supportive, and keep it out where it's not needed?

PS: During the years when children are focused on English for their career needs, say from high school onwards, they can hardly keep in touch with the mother tongue. Can they get back to it at a later stage?

MLT: 'Need', I believe, is the key word. It provides motivation (the key to learning) for acquiring English that the child is conscious about. But the language learnt in the early childhood does not die. It remains dormant. The script may present some difficulty, though. Then, there are also social needs that continue to be met in the children's languages.

PS: What would you say if there is a curriculum where literature – prose, stories, poems – is taught in the mother tongue (to develop reading skills in the mother tongue as well as to understand culture), and English is taught for functional purposes?

MLT: There is certainly a need for children's literature in our languages, which enriches them, and we also need to encourage the writers of children's books.

PS: What is the impact of the multilingual classroom in the overall linguistic and cognitive

growth of children after they have passed out of school?

MLT: Bilingualism, as studies have shown repeatedly, is superior in a number of ways, including the ability to multi-task and give back-up support in essential ways. It also brings social tolerance. For Michael West, bilingualism was a problem and he thought that a speaker who knew no more than a language like Bengali had only half the language, whereas a monolingual English speaker had an all-purpose complete language; in his view therefore, the average bilingual child is at a disadvantage. But in our country, many children come from families where 4-5 languages are spoken with the greatest ease, an example of which is the on-the-spot translation that kids do. We knew child who came from a family where several languages – Marathi, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi and English – were spoken. This child enjoyed teaching us what words in one language meant in another.

PS: What would be your message to teachers?

MLT: Start with belief in learning and always stay as an eager learner; allow opportunities for learning, keep your mind open to learning with children, from children. The children work together and draw on their experiences in learning. The teacher is someone who helps them, is on their side. The teacher as a listener is important. I'd say that the languages are a source of delight for both teachers and learners.

PS: Professor Tickoo, thank you very much.

MLT: Thank you, Prof. Pushpinder Syal, for a true learning session.

<sup>1</sup> CALP should be seen in the context of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) which children acquire in natural contexts; CALP is acquired mostly through formal training and is transferable from one language to another.